



Homeless Link

Winter provision and SWEP toolkit

Practical guidance, tools, and good practice examples for local authorities and providers of SWEP and winter provision

Produced by

The National Practice Development Team

Acknowledgements

With thanks to those areas who contributed a case study.

Published

October 2023, Updated March 2024.

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About this guidance

Every year Homeless Link publishes refreshed resources to support local authorities (LAs) and partner agencies to provide emergency accommodation to people sleeping rough during cold weather, when risk of serious harm and death from sleeping outside is significant. This guidance relates to the winter period of 2023-24.

Housing Justice Winter Night Shelter Network

Housing Justice is a charity that supports faith and community groups that operate winter provision. Faith groups can become members of the Housing Justice Winter Night Shelter Network and can access support and good practice resources. Housing Justice also supports data collection from, and evaluation of, winter projects and operates an accreditation scheme to support providers to operate in line with best practice. They also publish a good practice toolkit for winter night shelters which has been adapted to reflect the changing models of shelters away from dormitory style provision¹.

Key considerations for planning winter provision & Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

The following table provides a summary of some of the key considerations that might need to be worked through when planning winter provision and SWEP. It is particularly relevant to LAs but may also be useful for others involved. The remainder of this document elaborates on these key factors, offers further guidance, and includes some examples of positive practice from across England of winter and SWEP provision arrangements. Further examples from winter 2021-22 can be found [here](#).

¹ See <https://housingjustice.org.uk/night-shelters/our-resources>

Winter Provision and SWEP – key considerations for LAs

	Key things to consider	For more information:
Planning ahead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who is the LA lead in planning for winter provision and SWEP? ○ Are the Public Health team aware/involved? ○ Which organisation will have overall responsibility for the operation of the provision? ○ How far will the LA be commissioning winter and/or SWEP provision? ○ How are faith and community providers involved? ○ Will bids for the Transformation Fund be supported? ○ Is there an existing multi-agency group for planning provision and making key decisions, or does one need to be convened? ○ Does this form part of the LAs wider rough sleeping strategy? ○ Does this group link to the local Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) and the wider winter planning arrangements for your area? ○ How will you include the voice of lived experience in your planning? 	Page 12
Geographical area of coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Will the provision cover just one LA area or is collaboration across multiple areas more suitable e.g., where numbers are low in any given area. 	Page 12
Winter project, severe weather provision, or both	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does your area need provision for the whole winter period? ○ If your area has a winter project, is there enough capacity for it to be used for SWEP placements or do you need additional SWEP provision? ○ Can your provision be offered year-round? 	Page 10
Capacity/need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What data do you have to indicate the likely need for winter and SWEP beds e.g., numbers of people seen sleeping rough in recent months?² ○ What data do you have about different demographics/support needs of those sleeping rough that can ensure your provision is tailored to those accessing it? 	Page 22

² Watch our webinar on the new rough sleeping data framework: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/ending-rough-sleeping-data-framework-webinar/>

<p>Service model</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What buildings can be used to meet the need? ○ Are there opportunities for the LA, faith groups, local businesses, or other organisations to gift a building or offer discounted lease/rental terms? ○ How far can your winter provision and SWEP reflect good practice and recommendations, reducing the risk of COVID-19/flu transmission by consisting of single room or fully self-contained accommodation units? ○ If provision includes communal sleeping areas – is there a clear reason why, and has the LA and the local Public Health team been involved in reaching this decision? ○ How far will your provision meet the needs of different cohorts – men, women, people who are non-UK nationals, people with restrictions on eligibility, LGBTQ+ people, young people, people with dogs? ○ If you have a communal sleeping model, what hours will it be open, what measures will be in place to keep people safe in the face of public health risks such as COVID-19 or respiratory infections?³ 	<p>Pages 13-14 and Greenwich case study on page 15</p>
<p>Support and move on pathway</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What additional services, such as support, food, signposting, and immigration advice can be provided/delivered? ○ Can you help broker relationships with organisations that might need to work together, including specialist organisations? ○ Is there a move on pathway to help people access longer term accommodation and support? ○ Could you consider an ‘in for good’ approach where no one has to return to rough sleeping? ○ Have you considered the support needs of non-UK nationals who may have restrictions on accessing benefits and services⁴? Could you enable access to specialist immigration advice? 	<p>Page 26 onwards and Barnet case study on page 33</p>

³ See our guidance and resources on Covid-19: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/covid-19-general-resources/>

⁴ See our guidance on supporting people with uncertain or restricted eligibility due to their immigration status: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/supporting-people-with-restricted-eligibility-due-to-their-immigration-status/>

<p>Funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How will provision be funded? ○ Have you helped to identify possible sources of funding such as RSI funding, Housing Benefit, other LA funding? If a charity is involved, have you considered fundraising income, Night Shelter Transformation Fund⁵ and other charitable grants? ○ How are you funding SWEP provision? Does this include income from HB? What about people who have restrictions due to their immigration status? 	<p>Page 21</p>
<p>Public Health safety measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Operating principles⁶ for commissioners and providers of night shelters updated by DLUHC in Nov 2023 replace the COVID-19 operating principles, withdrawn in March 2022. The principles cover public health advice and wider good practice to mitigate risks. ○ Government has also published guidance regarding testing in homelessness settings. ○ How well are you able to ventilate the building in particular communal spaces? ○ What arrangements have been agreed for minimising transmission between guests and staff and volunteers who may be showing signs of respiratory infections or when rates of infection are high? ○ What arrangements have been agreed for guests who would like to maintain social distancing? ○ How far can support and assistance be offered to guests to take up a Covid-19 vaccination/booster vaccination where relevant? ○ Have you engaged with your local Director of Public Health to gain expert advice to support staff, volunteers, and guests to stay healthy? 	<p>Page 14, the night shelter Operating Principles and COVID-19 testing advice guidance for homelessness services issued by DLUHC</p>
<p>Eligibility & access arrangements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is the provision accessible to everyone sleeping rough, or at risk of rough sleeping, including people with restrictions due to immigration status? ○ What organisations/people will be able to make referrals? ○ Is the eligibility criteria and assessment process as light touch as possible? 	<p>Page 9-11, 25</p>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/night-shelter-transformation-fund-round-2-prospectus/night-shelter-transformation-fund-prospectus>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/operating-principles-for-night-shelters>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who will assess eligibility, how will this be done, and what is the decision-making process? ○ Will verification of someone’s rough sleeping status be required? If so, does this avoid someone having to sleep rough again? 	
<p>Trigger of SWEP provision & communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Will the LA place rough sleepers in emergency accommodation for the whole winter or only in severe weather? ○ What definition of severe weather will you be adopting for triggering SWEP? ○ What flexibility will you have to allow for different types of weather conditions to trigger SWEP, such as snow, heavy rain, and strong winds which can all lead to significant risk of harm or death?⁷ ○ Who in the LA monitors the weather forecast during the winter months? How will this be managed if the person is absent or out of hours? ○ Do you have a network to share SWEP plans and notifications when SWEP has been triggered and when it ends – including outside of office hours? ○ How far are you using your website and media channels to ensure communication is as effective as possible? 	<p>Page 10-11, 23 and Reading case study on page 24</p>

⁷ Read the Museum of Homelessness’ report on ‘Severe Weather Emergency’:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/623b05f9825aa34cda99921f/t/6423301d2f6abf0202364811/1680027696562/Severe+Weather+Emergency+a+Museum+of+Homelessness+Investigation+2023.pdf>

Why is winter provision/SWEP accommodation needed?

There is no universal offer of accommodation mandated for people sleeping rough in England. The provision of shelter from a council is not a statutory duty unless a person is considered homeless and in priority need of assistance, even during cold or severe weather when conditions may be life threatening. However, there is a widely recognised humanitarian obligation on LAs to do all they can to prevent deaths and serious harm on the streets, and for their partners and the public to support these efforts. This has meant that for many years, LAs and local partners including faith and community groups, work together to provide emergency provision during periods of cold or severe weather. This can sometimes be limited to provision of support only in severe weather but is increasingly offered throughout the winter period. In some cases, there can be winter provision which is supplemented by severe weather beds. Winter and severe weather beds can be 'commissioned' and funded by the LA but in other areas they are funded in other ways⁸.

There is no single definition of severe weather for the purposes of triggering emergency accommodation – any conditions that increase the risk of harm to people sleeping rough can be classed as severe. This includes extreme cold, wind, snow, rain and even heat.⁹ LAs should not presume when, or in what form, severe weather will occur, and should be prepared each year to escalate responses as and when required¹⁰.

Having a flexible approach can often be most effective. Bear in mind that many people sleeping rough will already have health issues caused or made worse by homelessness. They may also experience added complications due to drugs, alcohol, pain¹¹, or medication. It should not be assumed that people sleeping rough have somehow become resilient to severe weather – if anything, the risk of harm and death from exposure is higher for people sleeping on the streets, as their health may already be suffering.

Cold: extreme cold can cause serious health problems and death for those who are exposed overnight or for long periods of time. Historically, SWEP provision was

⁸ See our full list of guidance on planning for severe weather: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/guidance-on-cold-weather-provision-swep-and-heatwaves/>

⁹ See our guidance and case studies on supporting individuals during hot weather: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/hot-weather-swep/>

¹⁰ The Government publishes guidance for local authorities on winter planning to prevent excess winter deaths although this only briefly mentions rough sleeping: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cold-weather-plan-cwp-for-england>

¹¹ <https://groundswell.org.uk/our-approach-to-research/peer-research/out-of-pain/>

triggered when the forecast was zero degrees or below for three days. It is now best practice to take a common-sense approach, where any forecast approaching zero is considered; the impact of rain, snow and wind chill are taken into account; and the 'feels like' temperature is checked, along with conditions underfoot (e.g., ice). There are benefits to opening provision for temperatures that are above freezing as this can be just as harmful, and for maintaining this provision over longer periods. These benefits are discussed throughout the guidance.

Wind: high winds can lead to an increased risk of injury through uprooted trees, falling walls, dislodged pieces of roofing, and other debris. LAs should consider the location of local rough sleeping sites and the potential for harm from gale-force winds. This is a particular issue for rural areas where people are, for example, sleeping in tents.

Rain: heavy or sudden prolonged rain can lead to flooding and landslides. People sleeping under bridges, on riverbanks or near the sea, streams or canals may be particularly at risk, but there may be less obvious flood risks, for example, drains or gullies. Standing water, puddles and flooding may continue to be a risk after rainfall has stopped. As well as increased risk of drowning, being stuck in the rain and being unable to change out of wet clothes/shoes afterwards can lead to a range of health problems, including trench-foot. There is also an increased risk of loss or damage to belongings such as identification documents.

Heatwaves: People experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of developing heat-related illnesses due their inability to keep cool (owing to a lack of shelter) and reduced access to showers and drinking water. In their 'Dying Homeless Project'¹², The Museum of Homelessness found that there were actually higher numbers of deaths of individuals in the summer, despite the common belief that more people die in the winter months. Needs are likely to be more urgent during daylight hours, so a different approach to SWEP may be needed.¹³

In addition to the direct risk associated with severe weather, the actions people might take to protect themselves from severe weather can also increase the risk of harm and death. People might find cover in unsafe places e.g., large lidded bins, which can result in crush injuries or death if the bin is emptied. They might enter buildings or properties without permission, including derelict structures, with associated risks around fire safety and building collapse. People may also increase their substance use as a coping

¹² <https://museumofhomelessness.org/dhp>

¹³ Read our guidance on supporting individuals during hot weather: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/hot-weather-swept/>

mechanism during bad weather. Attempting to keep safe and dry in bad weather increases the risk of death and injury to people without shelter.

Winter and SWEP provision is intended to minimise anyone having to sleep rough. It is therefore good practice to have provision that as far as possible is open to everyone that would otherwise be sleeping rough in the local area, including those with restrictions due to immigration status.

What is winter provision?

In many areas, organisations operate emergency access accommodation throughout the winter period. These are often operated continuously between November and March, are commonly run by community or faith-based groups, and usually make extensive use of volunteers. Some LAs directly commission or work in partnership with voluntary agencies to provide extended winter provision.

These winter accommodation models in the past have tended to be 'night shelters', usually involving dormitory style rooms with camp beds either in a fixed location or 'roaming' models where several different venues are used. These models are usually open only to provide overnight accommodation and with varying degrees of support and help with move on. Access, referral routes, and eligibility criteria vary, but tend towards an 'everyone in' approach ensuring that anyone on the streets can access regardless of immigration status and entitlements.

This provision has played a significant role in minimising harm and death to people who might otherwise sleep rough and have helped engage people whom other services have struggled to engage. Due in part to Covid-19, many providers of winter shelters have been changing their approach; offering more support, extended opening times, move on support pathways, and many have been remodelled to include single room accommodation. The overwhelming majority of winter projects last winter consisted of single room accommodation and there are increasing numbers of projects looking to permanently remodel away from shared sleeping spaces.

What is SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol)?

Having adequate winter provision helps minimise the need for additional emergency accommodation in periods of severe weather. However, every LA should still have a

Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which is used when severe weather is forecast. SWEP is a locally agreed procedure and offer, followed to minimise harm or death to anyone who might be sleeping rough, through the provision of emergency accommodation to support someone off the streets immediately. A local SWEP document is often published on the LA website or shared with local agencies.

As mentioned above, we recommend that protocols should be flexible based on empathy for people sleeping rough in severe weather, rather than sticking to a fixed approach. LAs should consider factors such as wind chill, snow coverage and duration of extreme weather when considering provision. The protocol should aim to prevent deaths on the streets so, if this means increasing the number of beds and opening for longer, the LA should do everything it can to facilitate SWEP and prevent harm. The protocol should be implemented (i.e., accommodation made available) on the first night when the agreed activation trigger is reached.

Historically, the minimum SWEP response used by many LAs was a forecast of zero degrees, or below zero, for three consecutive nights. The three-night guideline was an attempt to define 'severe weather', but a common-sense approach is now widely adopted as standard practice, where SWEP triggers take into account weather warnings, near-freezing temperatures, rain, snow, wind chill, gales or heat.

In areas where rough sleeping is not always an issue, including rural areas or where numbers are very low, there should still be a SWEP plan to ensure suitable accommodation can be provided quickly should the need arise. This could be through delivering SWEP in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

The LA should allocate responsibility to one of its team for monitoring the weather forecast (agree to use a single forecast e.g., Met Office), activating SWEP, and ensuring suitable provision is available. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has set up a 'Cold-Health Alert' system, where you can sign up to receive alerts¹⁴ when the weather conditions have the potential to impact the health and wellbeing of the population.¹⁵ A rough sleeping or homelessness co-ordinator is the most likely person to take the lead on implementing SWEP.

¹⁴ Sign up to receive alerts here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/weather-health-alerting-system>

¹⁵ Read the UKHSA's guidance on supporting vulnerable people before and during cold weather: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cold-weather-and-health-supporting-vulnerable-people/supporting-vulnerable-people-before-and-during-cold-weather-people-homeless-and-sleeping-rough#aboutcha>

As with winter provision, SWEP operates outside usual eligibility and entitlement frameworks that govern access to housing. It should be accessible to everyone, including all those who may otherwise be excluded from service; people with restrictions due to immigration status, people who may have previously been excluded or banned from services, and those with no local connection.

Targeting individuals should be on the basis of need, not housing entitlement. Where possible, LAs should work closely with outreach teams, day centres, police/community safety or other agencies supporting people experiencing homelessness, to identify and target people known to be sleeping rough (e.g., as opposed to sofa surfing, where support is needed but there is not an immediate risk of harm).

Verification (confirming that someone has been seen sleeping rough) is sometimes used to ensure that people who are most in need are prioritised for accommodation, however a flexible approach should be adopted.¹⁶ People should not be sent back onto the streets to be verified. Bear in mind that individuals often have good reasons for concealing their sleep sites, for example, due to vulnerability to assault or fears of enforcement, and so verification of rough sleeping should not be used as a barrier to offering SWEP.

Planning ahead

SWEP accommodation should be planned by each LA in partnership with voluntary, faith and community partners, utilising homelessness grants and local authority funds. Plans should be reviewed annually in consultation with partner agencies after each winter.

SWEP plans should usually be agreed by the end of September (or as soon as possible) to ensure that partners are prepared. Extended winter provision should also be planned and reviewed in a similar way. Good practice in delivering SWEP and extended winter provision requires cooperation and partnership working across agencies, both within the LA and more widely. LA housing and homelessness teams will usually take a lead in coordinating SWEP, but voluntary sector providers, outreach services, police, health services, food banks, neighbouring councils, assessment hubs, faith groups and mental health services should all be involved.

¹⁶ Read the findings from our focus group regarding rough sleeping verification: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/rough-sleeping-verification/>

Consider having a Winter Planning Group (with key stakeholders including representatives from Public Health teams and the Health and Wellbeing Board). Think also about including people with lived experience of homelessness and obtaining views and feedback from people using the provision.

Top tips:

- ✓ Use multi-agency meetings and forums to plan SWEP and winter provision early. Key stakeholders will include Housing Options, other LA teams (for example Community Safety, Public Health and Adult Social Care), local housing providers, people with lived experience, outreach teams, health services, police, churches, faith groups, other charities & community groups and day centres
- ✓ Work with other local authorities/sub-regionally to coordinate provision, including joint commissioning of support teams
- ✓ Keep updated about who is sleeping rough and their support needs and accommodation preferences
- ✓ Monitor temperatures and communicate with partners to ensure provision can be implemented quickly
- ✓ Encourage partnership working between the police and outreach services in order to identify and support individuals in need
- ✓ Encourage multi-agency communication daily in order to coordinate SWEP so that everyone can access provision – this could be daily emails and phone calls about activation and options.

Choosing an accommodation model this winter

Winter and severe weather provision is changing as a result of concerted efforts by homelessness service providers and LAs towards models of provision which minimise shared sleeping arrangements. As well as providing a safer environment which reduces the likelihood of transmitting Covid-19 and other communicable illnesses, single occupancy options provide more privacy and safety for specific groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ people. They are generally preferred by people experiencing homelessness, allow for greater engagement and more personalised support, and appear to be more successful in achieving longer term outcomes for people¹⁷.

Whilst it may not always be achievable, LAs and providers should make every effort to provide self-contained accommodation or single room options for people sleeping rough. Models could include:

¹⁷ See evaluation of winter shelters commissioned by Housing Justice: <https://housingjustice.org.uk/night-shelters/our-resources>

- B&B and hotel rooms – either used on a nightly booking arrangement or through a block booking arrangement. In a number of areas, smaller hotels have been used exclusively as winter provision.
- Privately rented houses and flats that have been purchased, leased, or rented by a service provider and used as shared houses or Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) where guests have use of their own room, sometimes an en-suite room, or with some sharing of facilities such as bathroom and kitchen.
- Hostels and supported accommodation allocating specific rooms or areas including ‘crash pads’ for emergency use.
- Re-directing existing units of supported accommodation as emergency accommodation.
- Temporary or modular structures such as ‘pods’ which have been placed on sites owned by service providers or local authorities providing short term self-contained units.
- Vacant council buildings being temporarily allocated as emergency accommodation which are either self-contained or adapted as shared houses with single bedrooms.
- Student accommodation.
- ‘Nightstop’ or hosting models where guests have their own bedroom living in a house with a host.

LAs and Public Health must make it a priority to work alongside faith, community, and voluntary sector partners to accommodate everyone safely, regardless of immigration status, previous housing experience, and local connection.

Providing more dispersed and self-contained accommodation options is likely to mean that additional support and resources (such as food) will need to be mobilised in order to meet the needs of people being housed. Working with partner agencies to adapt existing provision or create new support packages will be essential.

When planning SWEP and/or winter provision, agencies should check that they have suitable accommodation for different groups e.g., women, couples, young people, and people with dogs. In any type of provision, support should be provided to assist people to meet their needs and achieve positive move-on if possible.

Communal sleeping accommodation models

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) updated their operating principles relating to the provision of night shelters accommodation¹⁸ in November 2023. The principles prioritise the use of single room accommodation options where possible.

“The Government maintains its position that providers and commissioners of night shelters should prioritise providing single room accommodation options where possible.”

The Government (and Homeless Link) therefore continue to encourage the provision of self-contained or single room provision as the preferred model. However, the Government acknowledges that there may be ‘limited occasions’ where a communal model may be put into place to prevent people rough sleeping.

“We know that local circumstances may mean there are rare occasions where a provider decides to put in place communal models to prevent people sleeping rough, particularly in extreme weather.”

“As a working principle, communal sleeping arrangements should only be considered where it is justified by levels of rough sleeping need.”

The operating principles recommend that where there are plans for communal sleeping models, advice is sought from the local Director of Public Health prior to opening, so that advice can be provided on how to keep people safe from communicable diseases in such settings.

Greenwich Winter Night Shelter and Royal Borough of Greenwich

Greenwich Winter Night Shelter (GWNS) is an established winter night shelter which provides emergency accommodation, warmth, and support for 15 people over the winter months. Since 2014, they have run a ‘one shelter, seven venues’ model with the support of a part-time project manager and 300 volunteers.

The pandemic meant that GWNS was unable to offer accommodation in 2020-21 as the risk of transmission was too high. This prompted a decision to move away from the rotating model and focus on setting up a static shelter. The Royal Borough of Greenwich (RBG) supported GWNS to acquire and renovate a building which

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/operating-principles-for-night-shelters>

accommodated 9 guests in single rooms. One section of the building was set aside for women-only with separate toilet and shower facilities. GWNS is currently developing its casework function and has relaunched a year-round daycentre in collaboration with RBG to provide additional support services such as medical and welfare advice. They are hopeful the new model will provide more stability and consistency for guests as well as provide opportunities to increase service provision to work towards breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Watch Housing Justice's film about GWNS [here](#).

Cambridge City Council and It Takes a City Cambridge

It Takes a City (ITaC) Cambridge is a partnership providing a framework and mechanism to enable public, private and third sector bodies, and individuals, to work together in new ways to end rough sleeping in Cambridge. Cambridge City Council has worked closely with ITaC for several years. The adoption of the 'Everyone In' approach in winter 2020-21, offering high quality en-suite student accommodation, showed what a different and better model could look like, not quite "somewhere to call home" but somewhat on the way, compared to the pre-pandemic model of dormitory style winter shelters.

Last year they worked together to design a similar offer, albeit on a smaller scale due to the decreased levels of rough sleeping in the city. ITaC secured the use of a 20 en-suite bedroom facility with a large kitchen/dining/living area estimated to be sufficient to meet local need.

The offer was available to those rough sleeping in Cambridge City from November to March through a partnership between Cambridge City Council, Cambridge Churches Homeless Project (CCHP - which ran a church-based night shelter pre-pandemic), the Cambridge Street Outreach Team (SOT - County and City Council funded assertive outreach team), a security provider and ITaC and their volunteer and partner network.

Guests were referred to the accommodation by SOT and Cambridge City Council. Once in residence, they received support from on-site staff and volunteers from the volunteer and partner network. Food and practical help, including from existing specialist agencies, was provided. ITaC staff worked with the Council and other agencies to refer residents into Next Steps accommodation. Some of the costs of the project were covered by Housing Benefit claims. The City Council also contributed the funds it usually spends on cold weather provision and supported ITaC to apply to the Homelessness Winter Transformation Fund to help fund the project.

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council and Renewed Hope

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council has worked alongside a non-commissioned local charity, Renewed Hope, for many years to support single homeless people within the borough along with their commissioned outreach provider (currently Thames Reach). Renewed Hope previously operated a floating winter night shelter across Reigate & Banstead and the neighbouring district of Tandridge (involving 16 different churches) as well as operating a drop-in day centre in Redhill. They also supported the delivery of hot meals to those in emergency accommodation last winter.

The council is also working closely with Thames Reach to find routes off the streets for individuals sleeping rough both during, and outside of, severe weather periods utilising their RSI funding to fund some placements. Both the council and Renewed Hope agreed to avoid shared sleeping space models again over winter 2021-22. Renewed Hope provided support and accommodation to single men needing more intensive support - which consisted of single rooms in a fully furnished four bed HMO property with shared facilities. This is not a commissioned service and some funding to support Renewed Hope with this project has been sought from the Homelessness Winter Transformation Fund.

The council also used hotel accommodation and self-contained temporary 'cabins' (which were placed in a local leisure centre car park and included cooking, washing and toilet facilities), and worked hard to deliver longer term options tapping into other funding streams.

Renewed Hope anticipated being able to operate the HMO property from December, however, in reality, it took longer to source and upgrade the property which wasn't then available until February 2022. They worked collaboratively with the council and others to provide individuals with intensive support and ensured they were fully assessed under the Homeless Reduction Act - linked them in with statutory and non-statutory services to address support needs, provided emotional and tenancy support and helped them complete the actions set out in their personal housing plan. Renewed Hope provided a support worker along with one-to-one mentors and volunteers. Clients were encouraged to access Renewed Hope's drop-in centre for daytime support and followed the council rough sleeper pathway into longer term sustainable accommodation.

Top tips:

- ✓ Where possible offer single occupancy rooms instead of shared sleeping spaces to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission
- ✓ Ensure you are familiar with the Government's Covid-19 testing guidance for homelessness settings¹⁹
- ✓ Work with Public Health if communal/shared spaces are being considered
- ✓ Ensure accommodation has adequate facilities for washing, cooking, sleeping and storage of belongings
- ✓ Ensure accommodation is high quality and designed with the comfort and well-being of individuals in mind e.g., new beds, smoking shelters, dog kennels and free access to veterinary care²⁰
- ✓ Consider having different options available so that once individuals are triaged, they can access the most appropriate accommodation for their needs.

Insurance

When using spaces for emergency/winter shelter accommodation, providers should check that their insurance policy covers the activity in the space being used. Most organisations providing severe weather interventions already work with people sleeping rough, so existing insurance is likely to be adequate. Unless there is change of use with regards to a building or space, changing your policy may not be necessary. If you are still planning on using a church or a town hall you may need to check what, if any, restrictions your policy has. Whilst rare, serious incidents can happen in temporary provision, so make sure you are adequately covered. Most companies can insure spaces relatively quickly, so this need not be a barrier to offering support.

Covid-19 & other public health risks

People experiencing homelessness are likely to have underlying health needs and inequalities and may be more vulnerable to infection. Public health risks should be considered by all service providers and particularly where there are shared living spaces, or if communal sleeping models are being used due to the high risk of transmission in shared air spaces. Although there are no longer specific regulations in place around Covid-19, it is recommended that night shelters apply simple principles to

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-outbreaks-in-prisons-refuges-and-other-higher-risk-accommodation-settings>

²⁰ StreetVet is a charity delivering free essential veterinary care and services to the pets of people experiencing homelessness in multiple locations around the UK: <https://www.streetvet.co.uk/>

help them stay in control of infection. This will help to reduce transmission of Covid-19 and other respiratory infections that may be circulating.

It is important to ensure that there is adequate ventilation in communal spaces by uncovering vents and opening doors and windows. Good air circulation makes it less likely that infectious particles are inhaled. Guests, staff, and volunteers should also wash their hands regularly with soap and water or use hand sanitiser. This is an effective way to reduce the risk of catching illness.

Although social distancing for Covid-19 is no longer required, shelter providers should be prepared to support those who wish to maintain this. Measures should be put in place to enable people to limit the contact if someone is showing signs of respiratory infection or if they are vulnerable, for example, if they are not fully vaccinated. People may wish to wear face masks if they are coming into contact with someone who is at higher risk of becoming seriously unwell from respiratory infections or when rates of Covid-19 or other infections are high.

If someone tests positive for Covid-19, they should follow guidance for those with respiratory symptoms. It is recommended that providers support guests and staff testing positive to self-isolate. There should be clear arrangements made for how the provider will enable self-isolation where required. Since 1st April 2023, the UKHSA is only providing free **outbreak** testing to high-risk settings, such as homelessness services (including night shelters, hostels, hotels, and other temporary accommodation). An outbreak is defined as 2 or more linked cases of Covid-19 in the specific setting within 14 days. The only exception to this is for [individuals who are eligible for Covid-19 treatment](#) who will continue to be eligible for free symptomatic tests.²¹ Staff should identify service users who are eligible for Covid-19 treatments and ensure they can access Covid-19 testing if required.

People experiencing homelessness have been prioritised by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation for Covid-19 vaccines. Providers should make every effort to support people to become fully vaccinated and vaccinations should ideally be taken ahead of time to keep people safe.

It is also advisable to maintain a positive relationship with your local Director of Public Health who can provide expert advice to ensure that everyone accessing your shelter stays healthy and is protected from threats to their health.

²¹ For more information, including how to order tests, see Homeless Link's Covid-19 General Guidance & Resources: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/covid-19-general-resources/>

Health impacts of cold weather

Exposure to cold weather can include the risk of hypothermia, especially for those with a cognitive impairment (including as a result of dementia, traumatic brain injury or from drug and alcohol use) who are less able to recognise that they feel cold.²² Other health impacts may include:

- Accidents and injury (e.g., by slipping on ice during cold conditions).
- risk of delayed medical care as severe and/or deteriorating health may be dismissed as sleeping or intoxication.
- air pollution tends to worsen on very cold, clear days, which can in turn increase the risk of respiratory problems.

More information on the health effects from cold weather can be found in the UKHSA's Adverse Weather & Health Plan.²³ The government has also published a 'Cold Health Alert' (CHA) action card²⁴ to support services to prepare for and respond effectively to cold weather, along with the UKHSA's recently published toolkit to help local organisation plan and deliver warm spaces.²⁵

Top tips:

- ✓ Work in partnership so that communal accommodation options are only implemented as a last resort, when leaving someone on the street would be a risk to health or life.
- ✓ There are no longer specific regulations in place relating to Covid-19, but it is good practice to apply simple principles to reduce risks to public health from Covid-19 and other respiratory infections.
- ✓ Where there are communal spaces or provision, ensure that there is adequate ventilation and good hygiene is practiced.
- ✓ Organise suitable accommodation for people who have symptoms of respiratory infections or who test positive for Covid-19 to restrict their contact with others.
- ✓ Maintain a positive relationship with your local Director of Public Health and keep updated on the latest guidance and information.
- ✓ Resources on Covid-19 can be accessed on Homeless Link's website²⁶.

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cold-weather-and-health-supporting-vulnerable-people/supporting-vulnerable-people-before-and-during-cold-weather-people-homeless-and-sleeping-rough#health-impacts-of-cold-weather>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adverse-weather-and-health-plan>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cold-weather-plan-action-cards-for-cold-weather-alert-service/cold-health-alert-action-card-for-health-and-social-care-providers>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/warm-spaces-in-england-an-evidence-review-and-toolkit/warm-spaces-in-england-an-evidence-review-and-toolkit-for-local-organisations>

²⁶ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/?topics=covid-19>

Any type of accommodation used should be fully risk assessed in relation to Government advice on Covid-19 and other risks to public health.

People can become very unwell when sleeping rough in low temperatures. Providers should seek to involve health services so that those requiring treatment are identified and linked with the appropriate services to meet their needs. Relevant medical or public health advice should be sought to manage any concerns.

Top tips:

- ✓ Liaise with Public Health and other health colleagues to reduce the risks posed by exposure to cold weather
- ✓ Link with local GPs or clinics to offer people ways to manage their health; people can be referred to GPs as temporary patients
- ✓ NHS cards can be created to help people access GP registration²⁷.
- ✓ Arrange for health professionals to visit individuals in a proactive and responsive way to ensure health is monitored and support is provided when needed.

Funding options

There are a number of possible options for funding emergency accommodation which will depend on the model and scale of provision, the extent of volunteer input, and other non-financial support.

Firstly, consider how far the provision can be funded by the LA (or all LAs if it's a cross-borough model). This could include use of homelessness grants including the Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI).

The 'Night Shelter Transformation Fund'²⁸ was launched in July 2022 providing £10m across three years to transform communal provision, which may include the delivery of year-round accommodation and support. Organisations, with support from their local authority, can apply for different funding including that for revenue costs, capital costs or a new Capital Incubator fund to support development. Both Homeless Link and Housing Justice are supporting DLUHC with the delivery of this grant programme.²⁹

²⁷ See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/blog/everyone-is-welcome-in-general-practice/>

²⁸ <https://homeless.org.uk/news/dluhc-announces-new-night-shelter-transformation-fund-working-with-homeless-link-and-housing-justice/>

²⁹ For more information on the Night Shelter Transformation Fund, visit: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/night-shelter-transformation-fund-round-2-prospectus/night-shelter-transformation-fund-prospectus>

Some projects claim Housing Benefit and where this is agreed, agencies should work closely with the local Housing Benefit team to ensure that applications are processed quickly, and delays do not prevent access to beds.

Using a diverse range of funding streams can make a service more resilient to the threat of cuts, and LA funding is often supplemented by voluntary donations and organisational funding streams. Services can also appeal to businesses and members of the public for 'in kind' donations. These resources can be maximised by advertising for specific items that are needed such as toiletries, food, and travel vouchers. It is important to start putting plans in place for funding early, well before the winter period, and often as soon as the previous year's services have closed.

Top tips:

- ✓ Pool resources with neighbouring authorities to create options tailored for specific cohorts
- ✓ Coordinate with other authorities to reduce competition for affordable temporary solutions
- ✓ Use social media campaigns to increase donations from the community
- ✓ Encourage and support providers to apply for Night Shelter Transformation funding³⁰
- ✓ Block book hotel rooms and negotiate reduced rates
- ✓ Work with commissioned providers, and faith and community groups, to coordinate roles and resources
- ✓ Engage and involve Housing Benefit colleagues from the planning stage where relevant, to ensure all potential income is gathered.

Identifying need

Planning should be based on current local need, including where there may be an unexpected demand/exceptionally severe weather. Use available data sources such as intelligence from outreach and other partners (such as street pastors and park wardens), CHAIN or another database of local rough sleeping intelligence, and StreetLink referrals. Speak to people sleeping rough and seek to co-produce provision, as this is likely to increase take-up and positive outcomes³¹. You will need to know not only numbers, but support needs, types of housing and support that will be suitable, and how much provision may be needed for those with specific demographics e.g.,

³⁰ <https://homeless.org.uk/what-we-do/grants-and-investment/the-night-shelter-transformation-fund-2023/>

³¹ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/co-production-toolkit/>

women, young people, people with restricted eligibility, couples, LGBTQ+ people and people with dogs.

Recording, monitoring & sharing data

Capturing the demographic and support needs of individuals accessing SWEP and extended winter provision helps LAs and providers to plan effectively for the future. Recording information can be tricky when the service is being delivered quickly, but sharing information between services can save time and resources. LAs and their partners are each responsible for ensuring they understand and comply with data protection legislation.³²

Relevant information about a person's situation can help identify and respond to support needs, ensure future provision is effective, and monitor whether current provision is serving people equally. Bear in mind that some people may be unwilling to disclose much information initially and this should not automatically exclude them from provision. Keep data collection under review to ensure it is relevant but where possible, record³³:

- Names, contact numbers and emails
- Demographic data: gender, age/date of birth, nationality, ethnicity
- Primary support needs
- Length of time sleeping rough
- Previous contact with services, including past use of SWEP/winter shelters
- Where clients move on to when they leave e.g., return to the streets, positive move on etc.

Use of B&B accommodation for SWEP can create additional difficulties when trying to monitor clients' move on, if there is no other support around the placement. LAs are increasingly adopting an 'in for good' approach but where this is not possible, look for ways to measure outcomes, for example, could B&B staff ask someone where they will go after SWEP, or can you arrange to meet/speak to the person as SWEP ends, and discuss what further support they might need? Ask people about how to keep in touch e.g., phone or email.

³² See our resources on GDPR: <https://homeless.org.uk/search/?q=gdpr>

³³ A template monitoring form and tool produced some years ago may still be useful: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/guidance-on-cold-weather-provision-swep-and-heatwaves/>

Ideally there will be regular contact from the SWEP Coordinator in order to engage people, including those placed in B&B, in order to find positive move on and to ensure individuals don't 'fall between the gaps'. Coordinators must ensure that nobody is placed and then forgotten, and that there are procedures for closing SWEP cases and recording outcomes. Accountability for checking welfare and move on should rest with a named person or team, if not with the coordinator themselves.

For more information on effectively capturing and using data to measure impact, please see our [toolkit](#).

Communication

Simple and effective communication is essential. If SWEP is going to open, this information needs to be shared quickly and as widely as possible, for example, via the website and social media channels of the LA and partners, through local media and other platforms e.g., digital displays at transport hubs or areas of high footfall. There is little point in a LA activating SWEP if it's not communicated effectively, so it helps to bring in people who are, or would be, rough sleeping. Referral routes should be shared with police, outreach, hostels, and other teams/services who may be in touch with people sleeping rough. If it isn't possible to publicise the address of SWEP provision, ensure the referral route/point of contact is publicised (e.g., via Housing Options or support providers), plus 'out of hours' arrangements.

Bear in mind that staff from other sectors may need more information to understand what is being offered and who it is intended for, to reduce the risk of inappropriate referrals. Hospitals, police, and social service teams should be clear about when and how they can make referrals.

The public should be made aware of StreetLink³⁴, so that referrals can be made alerting LAs about people seen sleeping rough in their area. You could also advertise a local telephone number and a statement along the lines of *'No-one needs to sleep rough - [insert Local Authority name] will ensure everyone has access to shelter. If you are concerned, visit the StreetLink website.'* A single referral point is easier to disseminate than details of different arrangements, especially if your SWEP provision is spread across several providers. Use local newspapers, social media, and email networks to communicate with as many people as possible.

³⁴ www.streetlink.org.uk

Reading Borough Council

Over winter 2021-22 under Reading Borough Council's Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP), additional emergency accommodation was provided for people that were rough sleeping in the borough during periods of severe cold weather (where temperatures of 0° or lower are predicted to last a minimum of 3 nights). In 2021-22, the Council, St Mungo's, Faith Christian Group and Launchpad worked with local accommodation providers to offer self-contained accommodation for these SWEP placements. Individuals did not need to have recourse to public funds or a local connection to access a severe weather placement.

Trigger of SWEP

The council and St Mungo's worked together to review temperatures every day over the winter months - staff receive weather alerts from the Met Office and check the Met Office website daily to review predicted temperatures. SWEP is then activated when temperatures are predicted to be 0° or lower for 3 consecutive days. However, other severe weather conditions are taken into account, for example, severe snowfall/snow on the ground, wind-chill, widespread ice and 'feels like' temperatures meaning there can be other circumstances when SWEP is triggered.

Accommodation offer and how people can access it

Placements under SWEP lasted for the duration of the identified period of cold weather according to the predicted temperatures. In 2021-22, accommodation placements were in self-contained units. To access emergency accommodation during a SWEP period, individuals at risk of rough sleeping were assessed and referred to a placement either through St Mungo's, Reading's commissioned outreach service, via the council's Homelessness Prevention Team or, if out of hours, via the council's Emergency Duty Service.

Communication

The council emailed partners to inform them when SWEP was activated with as much warning as possible and with an indication of how long it was predicted to last. Updates were provided at regular intervals to partners, including when SWEP was to be deactivated. The Street Support Reading [Website](#) was also updated with details of SWEP and how to access it.

Top tips:

- ✓ Designate or employ a SWEP/winter provision Coordinator to act as a single point of contact over this period (and ensure responsibilities are delegated when absent from work)
- ✓ Inform frontline staff across teams/agencies about what SWEP is, when it opens, and how to refer
- ✓ Regular communication with partner agencies before and during SWEP improves risk management and allows for discussion around trends, issues, and improvements to be made in real time.
- ✓ Use existing multi-agency meetings to plan and discuss the use of SWEP
- ✓ Ensure those who come into contact with people sleeping rough (especially out of hours) are aware of provision and referral routes
- ✓ Consider flyers with information of how to access SWEP
- ✓ Consider how people will travel to SWEP or other emergency provision and ensure distances and travel costs are not a barrier for accessing the service
- ✓ Partnership working between LA housing teams, outreach services and day centres – identify those likely to need provision, coordinate the approach to inform stakeholders about when provision opens and how to make referrals.

Logistics

Project logistics, such as when services will open and close, when people can be booked in, and how people can be referred, need to be planned well in advance of the winter months and are especially important if a communal shelter model is being used. All project logistics must comply with guidance related to Covid-19.

Clear procedures, written in plain English, should be put in place, and communicated effectively to staff, volunteers, partner organisations and potential guests. A disorganised or inconsistent service increases risk, as staff are more likely to have to turn people away, and there may be frustrations for both staff and people using the service that can be avoided by better planning and communication. A single point of contact or coordinating team can play a vital role in making best use of resources and getting people into SWEP quickly and safely. Consider how people will access SWEP out of hours and where the access point will be located – wherever possible, avoid people having to wait on the street for outreach teams to find them.

If using communal accommodation, open services late afternoon/early evening to provide more time for booking in, risk assessment and support work. If possible,

complete booking in processes with people earlier in the day, to reduce delays and frustrations at night. Later check-out times, with links/transport to move-on accommodation or other services increase your opportunities to engage people with support, as well as reducing the risk of disruption to the neighbourhood if groups leave without anywhere to go. Causing disruption or disturbance to neighbours could affect planning permission for future provision, so attention should be given to how the service will manage the times when people are entering and exiting the building and work out how to minimise any negative impact.

While policies and procedures should be in place, try to be flexible – it can be difficult for people sleeping on the streets to follow procedures, especially if it means travelling to appointments at fixed times. Staff should make decisions based on assessment of need and risk, with prevention of harm as a priority.

Top tips:

- ✓ Don't forget the practicalities: catering, bedding, laundry etc.
- ✓ Introduce daytime booking in slots so that staff can fully assess and explain how the service will work.
- ✓ Stay open until Monday (if SWEP is activated on a Friday) to improve coordinator with other support services.
- ✓ Fund travel between rural and urban areas to encourage take-up of provision at a distance.

Support and move-on

Most of the individuals accessing SWEP/winter provision will have additional support needs as well as their immediate need for shelter. Accommodation should be linked to support, either on-site or via a partner agency. If traditional night shelter provision is to be used, shelter providers should link and coordinate with agencies that are there to support people during the day.

Support might include access to move-on accommodation, healthcare, education, employment, substance use services, benefits advice, immigration advice and creative/leisure activities. It is good practice to listen to what the individual themselves wants and to recognise and build on their strengths as part of working collaboratively to solve immediate problems.³⁵ SWEP/winter provision often provides an opportunity to engage individuals who have been reluctant to accept support in the past, or people who are new to the streets, where a connection with services can avoid their situation

³⁵ See our resources on strength-based practice: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/being-strengths-based/>

getting worse. Support should be provided by experienced staff with a range of flexible options offered.

While individuals should always be encouraged to accept the support that is provided, this should not be a condition of accessing accommodation. Some people may not feel ready to accept support, or the support offer might not be right for them, and this should be respected. The priority is to reduce the risk of immediate harm in severe weather. Continue to offer support over time, as people may become ready for change later on.

In the past, we have encouraged LAs to make available day time provision for individuals who are being housed in accommodation options that are not accessible during the day. We would hope, given the guidance above, that the need for this will be limited this year due to the increased use of self-contained housing options.

If provision which is not accessible during the day will still be used, then it is recommended that the following also apply:

- Shelter should be provided to people during the daytime to manage health risks related to the cold weather
- Review and map existing day services and their opening times, as well as identifying any services that could extend their SWEP into daytime.

Top tips:

- ✓ Outreach staff with lived experience of homelessness can be successful at engaging people normally described as 'hard to reach'
- ✓ Employ staff and volunteers who speak the same languages as people using SWEP and make literature about SWEP available in different languages.
- ✓ Bring in staff from other services to engage people during SWEP
- ✓ Work with partner agencies to discuss and agree potential move-on options in advance of severe weather
- ✓ Recognising the complex issues people face, continue to offer housing and support even if a previous placement was unsuccessful
- ✓ Work with partners to provide a lead worker for people with the most complex needs, to build a strong relationship with the individual and navigate them through services and systems that can be bewildering
- ✓ Aim for a co-ordinated approach and partnership between the council, rough sleeper outreach team, voluntary organisation, community health professionals and supported accommodation providers.

Staffing and volunteers

Services need committed and trained teams who are able to work flexibly and who have a good knowledge of the homelessness sector. A combination of paid staff and volunteers often works best to respond to the unpredictable nature of SWEP and extended winter projects.

- Professional boundaries training is essential for volunteers. Training should also cover areas such as safeguarding, effective communication and de-escalation of challenging behaviour, risk assessment, mental health, and drug and alcohol use. A range of free webinar recordings on different topics can be found in our resource library³⁶.
- Try to utilise volunteers' skills appropriately and offer a range of tasks according to levels of experience and skills. Tasks for less experienced/skilled volunteers could include cooking, cleaning, sorting out bedding, providing social and well-being activities
- If volunteers are to carry out any one-to-one support they should have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check³⁷ which typically requires a longer lead-in time, but DBS checks won't be necessary for every volunteer
- Actively recruit volunteers with lived experience of homelessness and consider diversifying your team (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, languages) to improve service provision
- Volunteers should not be put at risk. A clear induction, supervision and support pathway should be put in place so that they can raise concerns and develop their skills effectively. There should be simple protocols for responding to incidents, covering on-call access where experienced staff are not present, and contact details for external agencies.

For more information on supporting volunteers, please see our resources³⁸.

People refusing shelter

Services regularly report difficulties in persuading some people to access accommodation, even during extremely cold weather. There are a range of reasons why people refuse and, ultimately, individuals with capacity may make choices that other people find hard to understand. At the same time, rough sleeping is a high-risk

³⁶ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/?types=webinar>

³⁷ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/dbs-checks-in-recruitment/>

³⁸ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/managing-volunteers-in-homelessness-services/>

situation and people might find it harder to make decisions if they are exhausted, hungry, afraid, in pain, using substances etc. There is a balance to be struck between respecting the choices and autonomy of the individual and continuing to make offers of support and checking on that person's welfare. Many services have experienced someone refusing a bed for years, until one day they are ready to access support. Change is always possible.

Outreach teams should be having regular conversations to understand people's reasons for refusal. They should share information about the health risks associated with severe weather and highlight the increased risk for people using substances and for those whose health is already compromised. Ask what the right housing offer is to bring them indoors and see if this can be arranged.

If someone continues to refuse help during severe weather despite being at risk of, or already experiencing harm, it may be grounds to engage statutory services such as emergency services and mental health teams. Understanding the Mental Capacity Act (MCA) and working closely and persistently with mental health services may be the right route to safeguard vulnerable people during severe weather ³⁹.

Concerned that someone does not have capacity?

If you are concerned that a person does not have capacity to make the decision to accept SWEP in cold weather, the Mental Capacity Act may apply. The Mental Capacity Act Toolkit ⁴⁰ is designed to provide information about legislation, and step-by-step forms which can be completed to establish whether intervention can take place. It may be appropriate to use the MCA to frame the case for a Mental Health Act assessment or for emergency services to take the person to hospital if at risk (including if physically unwell or intoxicated). People's ability to make decisions about accepting offers of housing may be impacted by needs such as autism⁴¹ and brain injury⁴² or speech, communication, and language needs⁴³. Evidence suggests that there are higher rates of these needs in people experiencing homelessness. Homeless Link has published guidance about engaging and supporting individuals with these conditions.

³⁹ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/mental-health-and-homelessness-resources/>

⁴⁰ https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Using_the_Mental_Capacity_Act_2018.pdf

⁴¹ See the Autism & Homelessness Toolkit: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/autism-and-homelessness/>
⁴² See our guidance on brain injury & homelessness: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/brain-injury-and-homelessness/>

⁴³ See our guidance on communication needs & homelessness: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/speech-language-and-communication-needs/>

Top tips:

- ✓ Work with the Police as this can be helpful to assess risk where people are staying out in severe weather, especially in areas without an outreach team
- ✓ However, be aware that some people sleeping rough might not be happy about Police approaching them, so review this option on a case-by-case basis, and consider what alternatives are available
- ✓ Continue to monitor and support people who refuse to accept shelter through making frequent visits and providing resources and information
- ✓ Continue to encourage people to access SWEP facilities and try to accommodate different needs through providing options for different cohorts and individuals
- ✓ Keep in mind that trauma, autism and brain injury can all impact how people engage with support offers
- ✓ Ensure agencies are aware of the Mental Capacity Act toolkit and when to use it
- ✓ Be transparent and upfront about all aspects of the provision so that individuals can make informed decisions, know what to expect, and what is expected of them.

Managing risk and creating a safe environment

The low threshold nature of SWEP/winter provision can increase risk across a number of areas, both for people using, and delivering the service. Examples include people accessing unfamiliar facilities, people who have been excluded from services, people that you have little information about, or people who are reluctant to engage.

Brief individual safety plans should be completed, with the aim of identifying and managing risk, rather than as a basis for exclusion. Ask people about ways to help them manage/avoid risky behaviour and what might help them to stay safe and use the service appropriately. Focus on their skills and strengths – ask about past examples of successful engagement with housing and support. Consider any risk from others.

Where possible, brief and relevant information should be requested from an agency that knows the individual. Developing a working relationship with the Police can mean that checks are done quickly. If a high level of risk is identified, this should not be seen as an automatic reason for exclusion, but as an opportunity to put measures in place, to make the provision as safe as possible, or to make an alternative plan, e.g., B&B instead of a room with shared facilities, joint support working etc. Staff skills and training can make a big difference in how a service manages risk, for example, skills around boundaries, communication, and trauma-informed approaches.

Think about escalating responses in your safety plans – ask the person what steps can reduce the risk, how staff/volunteers can help them to engage within the conditions and expectations of the project, and discuss what will happen next if the situation becomes unsafe for them/others. Speak to the Police about notifying them of incidents and exclusions, as they may be able to check on someone's welfare. Any decision to ask someone to leave during severe weather should be made carefully, with reasons recorded and reviewed at the earliest opportunity. Health and safety regulations around buildings and staffing should operate in line with standard procedures. Policies around controlled substances, alcohol use, working with vulnerable adults and offenders should be in place, clearly communicated, and adhered to. Alcohol and substance use can be a key area of concern for services operating during severe weather and, while it should not be a barrier to support, suitable agencies with the experience and resources to respond should be involved in the delivery of the service.

Bear in mind that people who are alcohol dependent are at risk of alcohol withdrawal seizures, which can be fatal. Some services allow drinking, some ask for abstinence overnight but hold cans ready for when people wake up, while others have developed policies to allow controlled drinking in a designated area. It's important that people don't have to decide between the risk of severe weather and the risk of alcohol withdrawal. It might be helpful to focus on someone's behaviour when they arrive as the benchmark to assess risk, rather than having a blanket policy that assumes all alcohol use is unmanageable.

In some cases, people may be reluctant to accept a bed if their routine is to be very active at night (sometimes, but not always, related to their drug use). To reduce risks for these people, it might be that they are encouraged to come for a meal and to warm up even if they don't want a bed, or in shared space models, they are able to use a sit-up service/reception room to come and go rather than having to bed down, without disturbing other guests. People who experience insomnia and heavy smokers might also appreciate these options.

Services can reduce the risk of challenging behaviour by creating a pleasant, comfortable and safe environment. Offering food, activities, and entertainment, as well as training staff and volunteers to be welcoming and non-judgemental, can help people relax, interact positively with others, and reduce feelings of unease, in turn reducing the likelihood of incidents of aggression.

Top tips:

- ✓ Inform individuals about any rules at referral and ensure communication is adapted to their needs
- ✓ Ongoing partnership work with agencies such as probation and police to discuss and assess risk factors
- ✓ Use local hotels or B&B where risks mean individuals can't be placed in rooms with shared or communal facilities
- ✓ Be flexible and willing to make exceptions in response to individual needs
- ✓ Help people to feel comfortable and safe e.g., referral agency accompanies each person to the accommodation, gives a tour and induction, helps them to settle in.

Move-on

Identify routes out of emergency provision into hostels, private rented, social housing, and specialist accommodation so that people do not have to return to the streets. As well as saving lives, SWEP and extended winter provision should support people off the streets for good.

LAs should be working with providers to remove barriers to move on, which may include ensuring people have homelessness assessments. Consider options for people who might struggle to find accommodation otherwise e.g., those assessed as having a high level of risk and/or vulnerability, those with restrictions due to immigration status, couples, or those with pets that they will not live without. Partnerships between support agencies, outreach teams and local authorities can facilitate getting clients into stable accommodation and where there is lower provision or demand, consider options for spot purchasing or joint commissioning. SWEP and extended winter provision can reduce or end rough sleeping – it is an emergency response with the potential to achieve much more.

Barnet Homes, Homeless Action in Barnet and Together in Barnet

Barnet Homes delivers the homeless and housing service on behalf of Barnet Council which includes providing rough sleeper support and accommodation services. They work closely with two local charities, Together in Barnet (TiB) and Homeless Action in Barnet (HAB), to deliver support to rough sleepers in the borough.

The Barnet winter night shelter began in 2003 and TiB became a registered charity in 2014, offering Barnet's only emergency night shelter provision with just two employees

and a coalition of interfaith volunteers from 32 multi-faith communities. They work alongside HAB; a day centre providing case work and practical services for people experiencing homelessness. In 2020-2021, the pandemic meant that the revolving night shelter model provided by TiB closed and was replaced with a hotel model (with financial support from the Homelessness Winter Transformation Fund). When it closed at the end of May 2021, the good partnership working between TiB, HAB and Barnet Homes meant that none of the 16 residents returned to the streets.

Over winter 2021-2022, TiB worked once again on a hotel model which was fully supported by Barnet Homes and Public Health. This offered people who were rough sleeping, emergency shelter in the form of single occupancy, en-suite hotel rooms and included wrap-around support, working in partnership with the council and case workers from HAB. In addition, food and other practical support were delivered by TiB's network of volunteers from the communities who support the night shelter.

Barnet Homes also works hard to get people off the streets and into a pathway. They also provide accommodation placements to rough sleepers during periods of severe weather, using existing TA providers for studios and rooms with shared facilities. They do not have a target number that restricts the number of SWEP placements and they follow an "In for good" principle; working with rough sleepers to access properties via PRS schemes so that no one has to return to rough sleeping.

They recognise that there is a need for alternative winter provision for those that will fall through the gaps in statutory provision or who choose to only engage with the voluntary sector. In 2020-2021, two new accommodation streams opened in Barnet; a short-term, intensive support 17-bed hub aimed at getting people off the streets as quickly as possible and facilitating move-on into more long-term accommodation. This could be PRS or a new 42-bed housing project which takes a 3-tier support approach to prepare people for independent living. Both projects ensured that a large majority of the hotel guests had a quick route out of the hotel.

For non-UK nationals who do not have settled immigration status or have limited access to public funds, move on options can be particularly challenging. Access to help and support from qualified advisers is critical. For more information about working with people who have restrictions due to immigration status (including asylum seekers) please see our other guidance and resources⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/supporting-people-with-restricted-eligibility-due-to-their-immigration-status/>

Top tips:

- ✓ Ensure everyone has a homeless assessment with the LA
- ✓ Engage immigration advice services for those who have restrictions due to their immigration status
- ✓ Commit to finding move-on accommodation for all individuals before they are asked to leave
- ✓ Keep provision open until all placements have been made
- ✓ Consider how people can be supported around pre-tenancy education whilst they are accessing cold weather provision
- ✓ Work with partners to find rent deposits for hostel residents so that hostel spaces are freed up for severe weather clients
- ✓ Use starter tenancies and assistance via bond schemes for move on to suitable accommodation.
- ✓ Use dedicated staff to assess and support people to move on
- ✓ Make agreements for sharing needs and risk assessments to enable quick transfers from SWEP provision to permanent housing
- ✓ Build trusted professional relationships with those who access SWEP; responding quickly and effectively to interest in move on accommodation.

SWEP survey responses

In May 2023, Homeless Link surveyed local authorities across England to better understand their SWEP responses during winter 2022/23. Eighty-five local authorities completed the survey.

When asked about what went well during the delivery of their SWEP provision, the following themes emerged:

- Partnership working between local authorities, voluntary and community services, & faith groups etc, including frequent multi-agency meetings to aid communication around risk and plan options for those placed.
- Block booking hotel/B&B rooms in advance to ensure adequate accommodation options.
- Rapid response from outreach teams during SWEP activations

- Being able to accommodate some of the most complex individuals, regardless of their legal status or access to welfare benefits
- Increased engagement from clients due to being able to offer suitable accommodation on the night.

Across the responses from the 85 participants, fourteen specific challenges were identified as being common or somewhat common to the experience of all LAs. As can be seen from the table below, just under two thirds of LAs reported a lack of suitable, available accommodation and/or reliance on B&B or spot purchased accommodation as the main challenges. But availability was by far the biggest challenge. All the key challenges faced by LAs are as follows:

Challenge	Total LAs	% of LAs
Lack of appropriate or available accommodation	37	44%
Reliance on B&Bs or spot purchased accommodation	17	20%
High demand	15	18%
Difficulty placing individuals w/ multiple & complex needs	14	16%
Cost of accommodation	13	15%
Challenging behaviour by those being accommodated	11	13%
Available / shared accommodation being refused	10	12%
Difficulty placing high risk individuals / offenders	9	11%
Having to offer accommodation out of borough	9	11%
Time intensive / staff having to work long hours	9	11%
Evictions	8	9%
Location of accommodation / travel time & distance	6	7%
Identifying and finding those in need of SWEP	5	6%
'False' claims of homelessness / rough sleeping	4	5%

Respondents were asked how their experience (and the challenges they faced) would impact their future SWEP planning. The majority of LAs stated that they would start discussions about SWEP and winter provision earlier, to ensure plans were in place ahead of the weather changing. Many LAs suggested that they would increase their partnership working, for example, using a mapping exercise to identify all local provision. Another common response was that LAs would look at other funding options to ensure adequate funding was available for SWEP, despite budget cuts.

Further information and support

Please get in touch if you have any further questions or comments on this guidance, or wish to share intelligence or practice examples. Homeless Link will continue to share intelligence with policy makers so please do get in touch to let us know of any particular challenges your area is facing: joanna.turner@homelesslink.org.uk

Our Partnership Team work across England to support Homeless Link Members, local authorities, and their partners, to work together to end rough sleeping and homelessness. Find your Partnership Manager [here](#).

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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Let's End Homelessness Together

